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SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: COM MEETS NEW DEFENSE MINISTER ERJAVEC

Classified By: Chief of Mission Thomas B. Robertson for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a 22 December courtesy call by COM, new DefMin Karl Erjavec called for intensifying cooperation between the U.S. and Slovenia, particularly in the field of training. Erjavec confirmed that the GoS remained focused on its commitment to spend two percent of GDP on defense by 2008. He said Slovenia would send more intelligence experts to aid EUFOR in Bosnia in 2005, while Defense Policy Director Uros Krek said the Slovenes were evaluating options for joining a PRT within ISAF. Krek added that the GoS hoped to submit a list of equipment available for Iraqi Security Forces by the end of December. On the issue of no caveats for NATO-assigned SAF officers, Krek said no caveats exist but that cabinet approval would be required for any onward deployment from NATO HQs to Iraq or other destinations. END SUMMARY

2. (C) As the first ambassador to be received by new DefMin Karl Erjavec, COM was accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, Pol-Miloff and Bilateral Affairs Officer (BAO). Erjavec was joined by head of MoD's Defense Policy Directorate Uros Krek and Chief of Staff Franc Stanovnik. Erjavec spoke in Slovene throughout the meeting, but he did not ask for English to Slovene translations of COM's statements. After Erjavec made initial statements about "intensifying cooperation" that have become the GoS mantra in COM's meetings with the new cabinet ministers, COM led Erjavec point by point through a series of issues, both bilateral and multilateral.

DEFENSE BUDGET: SPENDING WISELY TO MAINTAIN PUBLIC SUPPORT

3. (C) In response to COM's call for the new GoS to honor Slovenia's defense spending commitments, Erjavec confirmed that Slovenia's goal remains two percent of GDP by 2008. He acknowledged the need to spend those funds carefully in order to maintain public support for Slovenia's gradually increasing defense budget. In this vein, Erjavec said MoD would undertake a comprehensive review of SAF equipment to ensure Slovenia would be able to reach its NATO Force Goals most efficiently.

FUTURE CONTRIBUTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN, BOSNIA AND IRAQ

4. (C) Signalling a wish to ensure Slovenia is both meeting its commitments to NATO and accruing the benefits of membership, Erjavec said Slovenia is evaluating options for participating in a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) led by another country under ISAF. Krek added that defense establishment leaders met recently in Bohinjska Bela to focus on plans to turn Slovenia's Mountain Warfare School into a NATO Center of Excellence. Erjavec thanked COM for USG assistance in arranging a planned February visit to Afghanistan to see SAF troops deployed to ISAF. He said Slovenia would increase the number of SAF troops stationed in Southeastern Europe by sending more intelligence experts to EUFOR in Bosnia in 2005. With respect to Iraq, Krek added that, by the end of December, MoD plans to submit to NATO and the Embassy a list of equipment available for Iraqi Security Forces. He said the list would include approximately 4000 AK-47s, among other equipment.

NO CAVEATS FOR SLOVENIAN NATO OFFICERS, BUT...

5. (C) COM pushed Erjavec to consider sending SAF troops to a training mission within Iraq, and he urged the GoS to keep its policy of placing "no caveats" on the deployment of Slovene officers assigned to NATO Headquarters. Krek clarified that - while there are no caveats currently in place - Slovenian law requires cabinet approval for SAF soldiers to be deployed anywhere outside Slovenia. Noting that the GoS is currently in the process of assigning officers to NATO Headquarters billets, Krek confirmed that cabinet approval would be required even to send an officer already assigned to NATO HQs on a mission to a third country. Barring an amendment to the Law on Defense that would require a two-thirds majority in Parliament, COM suggested that cabinet approval for NATO-billeted officers might be drafted to include approval for onward deployments from

Brussels.

A FOCUS ON TRAINING; NATO LESSONS FOR CROATIAN LEADERS

16. (C) COM highlighted both the BAO-led state partnership program with the Colorado National Guard and the Marshall Center as opportunities for SAF troops and civilian defense officials to participate in training programs and exchanges. Erjavec then echoed his call for intensified cooperation, noting that Slovenian troops need the best training possible to prepare for "higher risk" collective defense missions they will undertake in the future. Erjavec said that "enhancing and further expanding" cooperation with the U.S. is written into the GoS coalition agreement. (NOTE: Erjavec is the only cabinet minister in the new center-right governing coalition representing DeSUS, the left-of-center Pensioners Party. END NOTE) Krek acknowledged that Slovenian participation in Marshall Center programs had diminished recently but vowed to try to reverse the trend in light of a recent letter from COM and the German Ambassador highlighting new seminars for 2005. COM asked the MoD to take an active training role itself by cooperating on an upcoming Embassy Zagreb-organized visit to expose Croatian decision-makers to lessons learned on Slovenia's path to NATO membership.

COMMENT

17. (C) Erjavec delivered no surprises, but he was clearly "learning the ropes" in his first defense-related position after his experience in the Justice Ministry and working on human rights issues. We were glad to see the incisive, reliable Krek at his side, and we hope Krek will remain a respected voice within the MoD under Erjavec's leadership. Looking uncharacteristically harried, Krek told COM before the meeting that the transition to new leadership had kept him and the Ministry extremely busy. Despite a steep learning curve, and perhaps because of Krek's guidance, Erjavec seemed in command of his brief. END COMMENT

ROBERTSON

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